

## Little-known African bird: Maned Owl *Jubula lettii*—an elusive rainforest endemic

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Photograph by Pierre Camberlein<sup>b</sup>

**Le Duc à crinière *Jubula lettii*, un endémique énigmatique de la forêt tropicale humide.** Le Duc à crinière *Jubula lettii* est un oiseau forestier peu connu, dont l'aire de répartition s'étend du Libéria au Ghana et du sud-ouest du Cameroun à la République démocratique du Congo. L'espèce a été décrite, en 1889, par Büttikofer et nommée d'après Lett, le chasseur qui l'avait découverte au Libéria. Après avoir été placée initialement dans le genre *Bubo*, Bates estimait que l'espèce était suffisamment distincte pour mériter son propre genre monotypique, qu'il nomma *Jubula*, la forme diminutive du latin *iuba*, signifiant une crête ou crinière. Les longues plumes de la calotte et la nuque, qui forment la 'crinière', ne sont toutefois pas ce qui frappe le plus dans la nature, mais les aigrettes (« oreilles ») remarquablement longues. Les sexes de ce hibou brun-roux de taille moyenne sont semblables, la femelle étant d'habitude plus sombre et plus marquée, mais il y a beaucoup de variations. Le jeune est nettement plus pâle. La biologie de l'espèce demeure peu connue. Elle habite la forêt primaire, particulièrement les zones encombrées de nappes de lianes sur lesquelles elle trouve refuge dans la journée. L'espèce semble être principalement insectivore. Le nid n'a pas encore été trouvé et les vocalisations demeurent inconnues. Pouvoir observer cette espèce, classée comme « Insuffisamment connue », est donc surtout une question de chance.

**A**mong the least-known African bird species, several are, unsurprisingly, nocturnal. Maned Owl *Jubula lettii* is one of them. This seldom-seen forest endemic, recorded from Liberia to Ghana and from southern Cameroon to DR Congo, was first described, in 1889, by the Swiss naturalist Johann Büttikofer. He named it for the collector Lett, of which not much more is known than that he was Büttikofer's landlord when the latter stayed at Schieffelinville, south-east of Monrovia, during his second expedition to Liberia, in 1886–87 (Büttikofer 1889). The type specimen was collected in 'Pessy Country', i.e. north of what is today Careysburg, north-east of Monrovia (Büttikofer 1889, Gatter 1997). Although Büttikofer (1889) placed it in the genus *Bubo*, some researchers subsequently opined that it belonged in *Scops* (e.g. Sharpe 1900) or *Otus* (e.g. Sclater 1930). Bates (1929), who collected several specimens in Cameroon, considered the species to be so different from known genera that he erected a new genus for it, which he named *Jubula*—a diminutive of the Latin *iuba*, signifying a crest or mane (Jobling 1991).

However, some authorities, e.g. Reichenow (1901), Chapin (1939), White (1965) and Brosset & Énard (1986), merged it with Neotropical *Lophotrix* based on the species' similarity to Crested Owl *L. cristata* (Fig. 1). This resemblance

had already been noted by Büttikofer (1889) himself, who felt that the owl 'shows no affinity to any of the owls at present known from the Old World, but might rather be compared with the West-Indian [*sic*] *Bubo cristatus*, on account of the exceedingly long ear-tufts and the white alar spots.'

The superficial similarities in appearance and the two species' similar ecology are now generally suspected to reflect convergent evolution (Holt *et al.* 1999, König *et al.* 1999). Whether *Jubula* and *Lophotrix* are relicts from an early taxon of owls that survived only in old-growth forests unmodified during periods of climatic cooling, as has sometimes been suggested (Voous 1966, Hekstra *in* Burton 1984), demands further study. At present, Maned Owl's affinities remain uncertain.

The most distinctive features of this medium-sized, rufous-brown owl are its bushy ear-tufts and elongated crown and nape feathers, which afford it the maned appearance from which the species' scientific and vernacular names are derived. As few people have observed the species in life, Maned Owl's illustrations in handbooks and field guides are mostly based on specimens and may be misleading. Indeed, Brosset & Énard (1977), who had the opportunity to observe the species on several occasions in north-eastern Gabon, stress that its most striking character in the field



is not the eponymous ‘mane’, but rather the very long ear-tufts, which are much longer than those of, for example, Northern Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*, and are erected at 45 degrees. This is beautifully shown in Fig. 2. This feature had already been noted by Bates (*in* Bannerman 1933), who reported that upon discovering a bird in dense, shady forest vegetation, its erect ear-tufts showed very prominently.

The sexes are similar, most females being darker and more heavily patterned, but there is substantial individual variation (Brosset & Énard 1977, Kemp 1988). Although Brosset & Énard (1977) claim that pronounced sexual dimorphism exists in size, the male allegedly being one-third smaller than the female, this is not borne out by measurements available in the literature (e.g. Bannerman 1933, Kemp 1988). As in many owl species, juveniles are paler than adults and less distinctly marked overall.

Little is known concerning Maned Owl’s habits. It occurs in rainforest, where the species seems to favour areas with dense lianas (Brosset & Énard 1986). Its small, weak feet and bill suggest it is incapable of taking large vertebrate prey, and limited data from stomach contents indicate a diet of insects, notably grasshoppers and beetles, but remains of a young bird were found in one juvenile



**Figure 1.** Crested Owl *Lophotrix cristata*, Porto Velho, Rondônia, Brazil, 12 September 2014; this Neotropical species’ superficial similarity to Maned Owl *Jubula lettii*, which is now generally suspected to reflect convergent evolution, led some ornithologists to place the latter in the genus *Lophotrix* (Vitor Torga Lombardi)

Duc à aigrettes *Lophotrix cristata*, Porto Velho, Rondônia, Brésil, 12 septembre 2014 ; la ressemblance superficielle de cette espèce néotropicale avec le Duc à crinière *Jubula lettii*, dont on pense maintenant qu’elle est le produit d’une convergence évolutive, a amené certains ornithologues à placer ce dernier dans le genre *Lophotrix* (Vitor Torga Lombardi)

**Figure 2.** Maned Owls *Jubula lettii*, environs of Mikongo, near Lopé National Park, Gabon, 14 August 2014; the birds were perched in the open at c.2 m height and c.5 m from a forest trail, in an area with many lianas (Pierre Camberlein)

Ducs à crinière *Jubula lettii*, environs de Mikongo, près du Parc National de la Lopé, Gabon, 14 août 2014 ; les oiseaux étaient posés à découvert à 2 m de hauteur et à environ 5 m d’un chemin forestier dans une zone avec de nombreuses lianes (Pierre Camberlein)



(Bates 1929, Brosset & Énard 1986). Curiously, a specimen in Ghana was found to have been feeding on green vegetable matter ‘exactly like squashed green peas’ (Bannerman 1951).

The nest has never been found and its vocalisations are unknown. A song, tape-recorded in the Kouilou Region of southern Congo-Brazzaville and originally ascribed to the species, was subsequently identified as belonging to Vermiculated Fishing Owl *Scotopelia bouvieri*—an experienced hunter, who could correctly identify various owl calls and had shot a vocalising Maned Owl, had apparently confused the song of both species (Dowsett-Lemaire 1992, 1996). This may suggest that they possess a similar pattern and that the song probably comprises a single hoot followed by a series (Dowsett-Lemaire 1996). More recently it has, rather vaguely, been described as ‘a soft coo, similar to that of Collared Dove [*Streptopelia decaocto*]’ (BirdLife International 2014).

Finding this secretive owl, which is justifiably classified as Data Deficient (BirdLife International 2014), is therefore a matter of luck. In Cameroon, Bates (1930) found that, in the daytime, its presence was often betrayed by the excited chatter of small birds mobbing it. Lowe (*in* Bannerman 1951) had the same experience in Ghana, when, in 1934, he shot the only specimen obtained from the country (which also, incidentally, is still the only record: Dowsett-Lemaire & Dowsett 2014). As long as no definitely identified recordings of its vocalisations are available, the enigmatic Maned Owl is likely to remain elusive.

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